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Commentary

Good news from Davao

By Junefe Gilig Payot
Inquirer
First Posted 03:35:00 12/16/2007

MANILA, Philippines--THE PAST months have seen nothing but horrible news for the country--most of which can be traced back to the Palace by the Pasig River. Indeed, the stink of the latter is matched only by the stink of corruption and human rights violations wafting from the former.

But while people are still hoping to revive the river, they see Malacañang, with its present occupant, as a place beyond redemption. So much so that many of them waited in "hopeful" anticipation of the outcome of Sen. Antonio Trillanes IV's latest caper. (I was in class when it happened and so I conducted an instant poll among my students. Only two were against what Trillanes was doing.)

Somehow, this made me think that if one is looking for good news--or for even the faintest sign that this country is not entirely hopeless--he or she should look outside Metro Manila. For many of us, this means checking out the Across the Nation section of the Philippine Daily Inquirer.

Last Dec. 4, the section carried a report about what seems to be a first-ever-in-the-Philippines which, to me, was one of the best news events to recently happen in the country: the approval of the Comprehensive Urban Shelter and Services Development Code of Davao City.

Although many civil society groups in the city are ambivalent about Mayor Rodrigo Duterte's unorthodox style, they are one in praising his signing of this new shelter code for the city. I think he will be remembered positively for this very progressive piece of legislation.

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One of the most significant provisions in the new code is the requirement that housing developers in the city set aside for the urban poor 20 percent of their project costs which may be in the form of land. Already, several housing developers have complied with this requirement. Alsons Development and Investment Corp. has set aside 20 hectares while Robinsons Development Corp., which is developing a high-end subdivision has also donated 15 hectares.

Dam Vertido, one of the long-time social development practitioners in the city, was quoted in the *Inquirer* article as saying that the new housing policy would help address the growing problem of urban poor housing in the city. One of the people's organizations (PO) leaders in the city was also quoted in *Sun Star Davao* as saying, "Lipay kaayo mi nga wala na siya na-veto. Gi-review gyud sa mga konsehal. Sa nine months nga among hulat-hulat, na-approve ra gyud (We are very happy it was not vetoed again. The councilors reviewed it carefully. After nine months of waiting, it was finally approved)."

I was also very happy to hear this piece of good news because I have done two housing and urban development-related researches in the city and I have become friends not only with the NGO and PO leaders who have been pushing for such a progressive shelter code, but also with mothers whose families stand to benefit tremendously from it.

The first research was on the successful initiatives of POs and NGOs in providing shelter for the city's urban poor. One of the successful projects I documented is in Barangay Ma-a where informal settlers live in the shadow of posh villages. It became famous recently as the barangay where a 12-year-old girl named Mariannet Amper committed suicide because of her family's extreme poverty.

(The city authorities are now investigating if foul play attended her death. But whatever the cause of her death, let it be said that I have seen with my own eyes the poverty in Ma-a. It is no exaggeration to say that people there are dying, maybe not as dramatically as Mariannet died but just as tragically. And this tragedy is being played out daily in many slum areas throughout the country.)

The first research also showed that if given financial, technical and moral support, the poor would be willing and able to work hard toward providing themselves with shelter. Mind you, they do not want doles. In fact, the research showed that the repayment rates for land acquisition loans were quite high. Still, such successful housing projects need to be scaled up to make a significant dent on the growing housing problem in the city. I believe that the new shelter code will help achieve this, especially now that land is being set aside for the urban poor as a matter of course.

The second study was a city process-mapping research which I did with my mentor at the Institute of Housing and Development Studies or IHS in the Netherlands. (The research is part of a book which was launched at the World Urban Forum in Vancouver. You may check it online through the IHS website: www.ihs.nl.) The study showed that there was little collaboration between civil society groups in Davao City and the city government. It therefore recommended that they work more closely together.

Claudio Acioly, my research partner-mentor, personally encouraged urban development practitioners in the city to work together and engage the city government productively, instead of working in isolation on their individual projects. I would like to think that the new shelter code is one of the fruits of such a productive engagement and I hope that it will lead to more collaboration among the various stakeholders in the city, especially because one of the provisions in the code is the creation of a Local Housing Board, a "multi-stakeholder" body that will formulate urban development and housing policies for the city.

As I have said, this is good news not only for Davao City but also for the whole country. The latest count shows that there are 136 cities in the country which are also struggling with housing shortage and other problems that come with urban development. As one of the biggest cities in the country, Davao City is looked up to by other cities as a model of development. Thus, it is hoped that other cities will follow Davao City's example.

Malacañang may be hopeless, but the country is not. Davao City has given us reason to somehow feel that this is truly a season of hope.